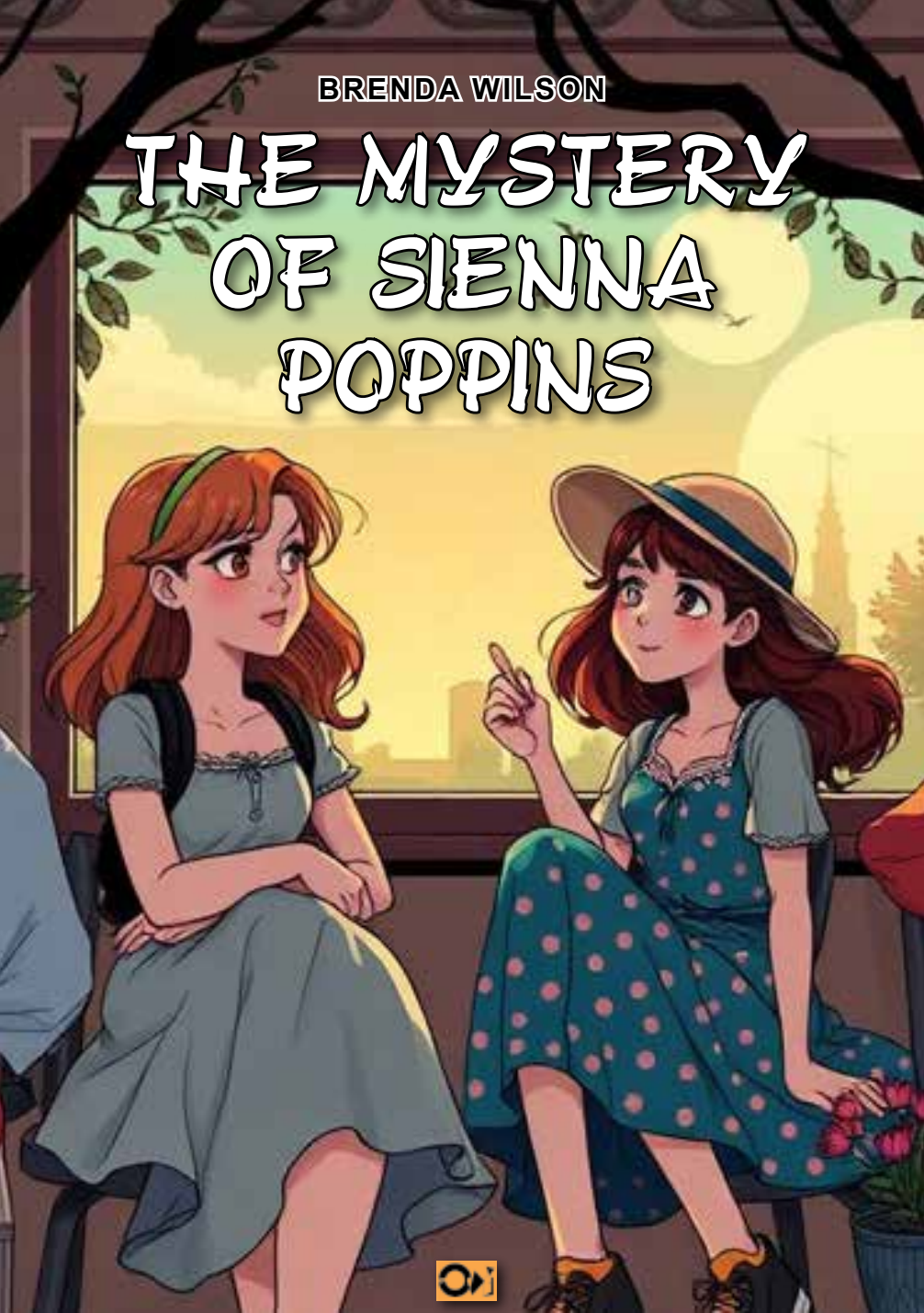
BRENDA WILSON

THE MYSTERY OF SIENNA POPPINS



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Brenda Wilson

The mystery of Sienna Poppins

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The attic of the old Whitmore house on Hemlock Lane possessed a distinct aroma. It was not entirely unpleasant, more like a scent that had gone on a bender in 1987 and was still attempting to recall its own name. The space held a heady mix of mothballs, quiet regret, and the faint, powdery fragrance of forgotten birthday cakes. Here, Ava and Maya, best friends since a simpler era governed by juice boxes and the tyranny of naptime, had retreated to unearth the past.

Maya, a self-proclaimed archaeologist of other people's junk, was rummaging through a trunk that looked like it had been salvaged from the Titanic.

"My mum insists Grandma was merely a packrat," Maya announced, her voice muffled by dust motes dancing in the single shaft of sunlight from a grimy skylight. "Mind you, she also calls her a hoarder, which is essentially a packrat with a postgraduate degree in chaos."

Ava, who had served as the designated voice of reason since age seven, examined a stack of mildewed magazines. "There is a subtle distinction," she countered dryly. "A packrat saves things because they might prove useful. A hoarder saves things because they believe each item holds a fragment of their soul and because they might face a sudden, critical lamp emergency in twenty years."

"Precisely," Maya chuckled, pulling out a cluster of yellowed lace doilies that seemed to have achieved sentience. "This is an absolute soul emergency."

She tossed the lace aside. Beneath it, her fingers brushed against a sturdy, leather-bound volume. She drew out a slim, crimson journal, its cover unadorned and its pages secured by a rusted brass clasp. It practically hummed with the promise of long-buried secrets.

"Dibs," Maya declared, prising at the mechanism. It yielded with a soft sigh. She flipped to the first page, where elegant, slanted handwriting sprawled in ink faded to a dusty brown.

"Read it aloud," Ava urged, leaning in, her scepticism momentarily faltering.

Maya cleared her throat dramatically. "'July 4th, 1987. They claim she haunts the old Beaumont estate. I know it isn't true; I know she is simply gone. Yet I cannot shake the feeling she is waiting for me. Or perhaps I am waiting for her. He claims he saw her by the lake, her dress as white as a shroud. We must reach Sienna before he does.'"

Maya's wide, unblinking eyes met Ava's. The stale air of the attic seemed to thicken instantly, the distant drone of lawnmowers fading into silence.

"Ava," Maya whispered, her expression alight with inappropriate glee. "We officially have a ghost."

"We have the melodramatic diary of a eighties teenager," Ava corrected, rolling her eyes whilst clutching her iced coffee. "It is the 1987 equivalent of a miserable blog post."

Yet a familiar shiver ran down Ava's spine. She knew, with the bone-deep certainty of someone tethered to a human catastrophe magnet, that their final summer before secondary school had just been upgraded from tedious to potentially ruinous.

The girl in the margins

Maya's bedroom was a controlled explosion of everything she had ever adored. Band posters jockeyed for space alongside dusty fairy lights, stack upon stack of battered vinyl, and a dress form she had christened 'Betsy', currently swathed in a succession of unfortunate vintage garments. It was the ultimate bunker for decoding the mysteries of the universe … or, at the very least, the enigmatic journal lying open before them.

They had commandeered Maya's king-sized bed, the yellowed notebook spread between them like a sacred text. The initial rush of discovery had long since given way to a dull headache, born from hours spent straining to decipher the author's melodramatic, swooping handwriting.

"Right then," Ava said, tapping a finger against the middle of the page. "This is a bit much on the gothic

hand-wringing, isn't it? 'The weight of my family's legacy crushes my very soul'… that's an awful lot of theatrical drama for a town that only possesses a single set of traffic lights."

"Perhaps the traffic lights *are* the legacy," Maya mused, her eyes narrowing as she squinted at a particularly florid passage. "Perhaps they hold the secrets to the universe, and Sienna's father was the brilliant mind who programmed the sequence."

"Or," Ava replied, adopting the weary patience of a seasoned scholar, "she was simply a bored teenager with far too much spare time and an oversized thesaurus. Do read the next bit aloud."

Maya cleared her throat, her voice dropping into a dramatic, breathy cadence that was purely the product of theatre club. "'Father is absolutely furious. He declares that the Poppins name has been forever sullied that she has brought utter shame upon our entire house. But it is not her doing! It is that dreadful boy. That Barnaby Crane. He is a serpent with a charming smile, and he has poisoned her impressionable heart. Alas, she will not listen to reason. She is utterly lost to the lake, and to him.'"

"Poppins," Ava repeated thoughtfully, allowing the name to roll around her mind. "I know that name. You know that name too. It's the name etched into the stone pillars at the big, spooky estate up on Hillcrest, the one all the local kids dare each other to run up and knock on."

"The Beaumont estate," Maya blurted out, her eyes widening with sudden realization. "Ava, we simply have to go there. We have to find the ghost! It is the only logical next step."

"It is the only logical next step towards getting arrested for aggravated trespassing and contracting tetanus from a rusted iron gate," Ava countered dryly, sitting up straight. "We are certainly not traipsing off to a creepy manor house to hunt down a spectrelike figure that almost certainly doesn't exist."

"But look at the journal, Ava! It's a genuine first-hand account of a tragic haunting! A proper local mystery! A ruined family secret!" Maya leaned in close, her expression desperate. "This is literally our last summer before everything changes. In a month's time, we'll be pushed into secondary school, which is essentially a maximum-security prison with slightly better fluorescent lighting. Do you honestly want our

final memory of freedom to be us… what? Binge-watching reruns of television shows we've already seen four times?"

Ava knew defeat when she saw it coming. It arrived in the form of Maya's bright, unblinking eyes and the frustrating, undeniable truth that an adventure was infinitely more appealing than sitting indoors all afternoon. "Fine," Ava surrendered with a heavy sigh. "However, we are conducting a daytime reconnaissance only. And we are absolutely not calling it ghost hunting. We shall refer to it as… historical architectural observation."

"That is a dreadful name," Maya said, already leaping off the duvet with unbridled energy. "But I love it. Grab your comfortable shoes. And your camera. And a heavy torch. Oh, and perhaps some biscuits, ghost hunting is terribly hungry work."

An hour later, the pair stood cautiously at the perimeter of the sprawling Beaumont estate. It was far more than a simple grand house; it was a sprawling monument to architectural ambition gone entirely mad. Victorian turrets sprouted from its upper corners like bizarre stone mushrooms, while the towering leaded windows resembled dark, brooding eyes that seemed to track their every move.

The towering wrought-iron gates, living up to every creaky, rust-eaten expectation, were flanked by massive stone pillars topped with heraldic lions that looked vastly more constipated than fierce.

"Right," Maya whispered under her breath, despite the fact that they were a good fifty yards from the main entrance. "We just need to make our way down to the lake. That's where Barnaby Crane was last spotted, and where Sienna's ghost presumably does most of her hauntings."

"Would you please stop using that word?" Ava hissed back, tentatively pushing against the heavy iron gate. It groaned in protest, sounding like a ancient beast being prematurely awakened from a century-long nap. They slipped quietly through the gap, stepping onto an overgrown garden path that looked remarkably like the set of a forgotten black-and-white horror film. Weeping willows drooped with heavy melancholy, and the afternoon air smelled richly of damp earth and crushed jasmine.

They followed a crumbling flagstone path that meandered around the east wing of the house. The lake soon became visible through the dense canopy of trees—a flat, silent sheet of grey water reflecting the dark overcast sky above. As they crept closer, Ava

suddenly caught a flicker of motion near the water's edge. She froze dead in her tracks, reaching out to grab Maya's jacket sleeve.

"What is it?" Maya whispered, instantly going still.

"There's someone down there," Ava murmured, her heart beginning to hammer against her ribs. A tall figure clad in a flowing white dress was standing motionlessly beside the water. From this distance, they couldn't discern any distinct features, only the soft, blurred silhouette of a person standing at the bank.

"Is it... do you think it's the ghost?" Maya's voice trembled slightly, though it was fueled far more by manic glee than actual terror.

"It's a human being," Ava insisted firmly, though her pitch was considerably higher than usual. "A living, breathing person who is most likely a groundskeeper, or a trespasser, or a lunatic. We ought to turn around right now."

They remained frozen on the path, caught in a delicate balance between sheer apprehension and overwhelming curiosity. But before they could make a decision, the distant figure turned abruptly,

her head snapping in their direction as if she had overheard their hushed whispers. A moment later, a woman's sharp, crystal-clear voice echoed across the open water.

"You two are certainly not supposed to be on this property!"

The figure began striding purposefully towards them, and Ava was fully prepared to bolt back towards the iron gates. However, as the woman drew nearer, her features materialized clearly in the overcast light. She was clearly no phantom. She was a woman in her early thirties, possessing a sharp, intelligent face, dark hair bound tightly in a silver clip, and piercing grey eyes that seemed to cut right through them. Her white dress was merely a simple cotton sundress, perfectly mundane.

"I am calling the authorities," the woman declared firmly, pulling a modern smartphone from her pocket.

"Wait, please!" Maya squeaked, taking a hasty step forward with her hands raised in surrender. "We weren't doing anything wrong, honestly! We were just... observing! We found an old journal in a trunk,

you see. A journal that mentions this house. It talks about a girl named Sienna Poppins."

The woman pulled up short, her thumb hovering directly over the glass screen. The name seemed to hang heavily in the damp air between them. For a brief second, Ava was certain she saw a faint flicker pass across the woman's face, was it surprise, or perhaps a sudden flash of old grief? Whatever it was, it vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

"Sienna Poppins is merely an old local story," the woman said, her voice dropping an octave. "An old, private family story. And it is certainly not meant for public consumption or nosy children. You both need to leave the grounds immediately."

Ava was ready to offer a swift apology and beat a hasty retreat, but Maya held her ground. "We truly didn't mean to trespass," Maya said gently, her tone surprisingly soft and sincere. "We just wanted to know the truth. We thought... well, we thought the journal might belong to your family. My grandmother left it behind in her attic. We only wanted to understand what really happened back then."

The woman looked deliberately from Maya's eager, open expression to Ava's cautious, anxious face. She

let out a long, measured breath, slowly lowering her phone back to her side.

"The Beaumonts were my family," she admitted quietly after a long pause. "My name is Phoebe. Phoebe Crane. And if you truly wish to understand the truth about Sienna Poppins, you aren't going to find it written in the margins of an old diary. You'll have to ask my grandfather. He was the only one who truly knew her. The one who loved her. And he is the one who has had to live with the weight of that secret for the last fifty years."

The curse of the cursed codex

Phoebe Crane did not just kick them out of her family's looming mausoleum; she did something far worse, far more psychologically unsettling. She invited them inside for homemade lemonade.

They were sitting in a surprisingly modern, immaculate sunroom attached to the rear of the grand gothic edifice, sipping the most intensely lemony beverage Ava had ever encountered. It possessed an aggressive tartness that made one's cheeks pucker violently and one's soul briefly leave the physical plane. High above them, the afternoon sun beat down through the glass panels, illuminating motes of dust that danced like suspended embers in the stale air.

"So," Phoebe said, settling into a white wicker armchair with the casual, languid grace of someone whose ancestors had owned half the county. "You

found a journal. A small red one with a heavily tarnished brass clasp, if I'm not mistaken."

Maya nodded, clutching her canvas tote bag against her chest like a mother protecting a newborn child. "It was tucked away in my grandmother's attic in an old cedar chest. Her name was Margaret, though everyone called her Maggie. She had… well, she had a lot of strange stuff stored away up there."

"Maggie Whitmore," Phoebe mused, a faint, melancholic smile touching the corners of her lips as she swirled the ice in her tall glass. "I remember her well. She was a few years younger than my grandfather, but she was always around the estate back then. She and Sienna were fast friends. Devoted friends, really. The journal you hold in your hands belonged entirely to Sienna."

"So, you actually know her?" Ava asked, leaning over the glass tabletop, her knuckles white. "You know what happened that night?"

Phoebe set down her drink with a sharp, rhythmic click. "I know the official story, the one whispered in drawing rooms and printed in archived newspapers. Sienna Poppins was the pristine daughter of the town's oldest moneyed family. My grandfather, Barnaby

Crane, was merely a local scholarship kid with dirt on his shoes. They fell deeply, recklessly in love, which sparked a massive scandal across Hemlock. Her father, a terribly rigid man, flatly forbade the match. Then, on a muggy evening in the late summer of '87, Sienna vanished into thin air. She left a brief note stating she was moving to the city to start anew. Her family was humiliated, so they hushed it up and claimed she had gone abroad to study music. The Poppins line eventually died out, and their vast estate fell into silent ruin."

"But the journal entries…" Maya countered, carefully extricating the faded leather book from her bag and laying it flat on the glass. "She writes about being deeply unhappy, about being coerced into marrying someone else. She keeps referencing a dark lake and a white ghost. And then the writing just… abruptly ends."

Phoebe's smile turned razor-thin and brittle. "The ghost is merely local lore, a bit of cheap atmosphere. The lake has always been a repository for campfire stories. As for the bitter truth… that is something you'll have to ask my grandfather about."

She smoothed a piece of heavy paper across the table towards them, bearing a neatly written address.

It pointed toward a nursing facility situated on the lonely, wooded outskirts of town.

"He is getting on in years, but his mind remains remarkably sharp. He's been sitting in that room for a very long time, waiting for someone to drop by and ask the right questions. Perhaps you two are finally it."

"Us?" Ava scoffed, a tone of heavy scepticism lacing her voice. "We're just two curious teenagers who happened to stumble upon a dusty book."

Phoebe met her gaze squarely. "Sometimes, my dear, that is all it takes to unravel a decades-old lie."

The Golden Oak Retirement Home smelled overwhelmingly of overcooked cabbage, antiseptic floor polish, and the cloying, synthetic lavender of air fresheners. Barnaby Crane occupied a sunlit corner room at the very end of the corridor, and he was not at all the frail, tragic figure Ava had braced herself to meet.

He was not a delicate old soul lost in a rocking chair. Instead, he sat bolt upright in a high-backed leather armchair, his posture as rigid as a parade-ground soldier's. A towering stack of leather-bound

histories rested on the table beside him, and a sharp, piercing intelligence gleamed within his pale blue eyes. At eighty-six years old, he looked like a man who could still comfortably hold his own in a fierce debate.

"So," he announced without an ounce of preamble, his voice a dry, gravelly rasp. "Phoebe telephoned ahead. She informed me that you girls had recovered Sienna's journal. Show it to me."

Maya handed the volume over with as much delicate care as if it were a fragile medieval relic. Barnaby accepted it, his weathered hands surprisingly steady, and turned the yellowed pages with a solemn reverence. He halted near the back of the book, his stern features softening into a look of profound, aching sorrow.

"'*He claimed he saw her lingering near the water, her lace dress as pale as a ghost*,'" he read aloud, his voice dropping an octave. "She wrote those words the very night before she disappeared. I was that foolish boy, you see. I was the one who saw her. But I was terribly mistaken. She wasn't standing by the lake. She was already gone. She was already far beyond my reach."

"Wait a moment," Ava interrupted, her brow

furrowed as she leaned forward in her chair. “You actually saw someone by the water that night?”

Barnaby raised his eyes, searching their young faces for understanding. “I saw a pale, shimmering shape. I was frantically tearing through the dense woods, desperate to find her, to plead with her to stay. But it wasn’t Sienna. It was a trick of the silver moonlight filtering through the pines, nothing more than a trick of light and shadow. It was an old myth that the town had conjured up over generations, the ghost of the old Beaumont estate, the tragic lady in white. She is nothing more than a piece of local folklore. But on that terrible night… God help me, I desperately wanted it to be real. If the ghost was real, then it meant my Sienna was somehow still there.”

“So, what really transpired?” Maya pressed, her breath catching in her throat. “The final journal entry just stops mid-sentence. Did she run away to escape her father? Did she… did she perish?”

Barnaby shook his head slowly, a bitter grimace tracing his worn features. “She didn’t run away from her family, Maya. She was running away from what they were doing to her because of me. Her father, Elias Poppins, was an extraordinarily cruel, callous

man. He had already brokered an arrangement for her hand, a wealthy merchant's son from the city who was a close associate of his. Sienna was destined to become little more than a prized trophy wife. I tried everything to stop it, but I was a penniless boy with no influence. I was nobody. She was systematically stripped of her agency and forced out of the house. But she wasn't sent to the city. I discovered the truth months later from a sympathetic parlour maid who had tried to comfort her. Elias had her forcibly removed in the dead of night and committed to a private asylum far up north. The note left behind was an elaborate cover story to protect the family name."

"An asylum?" Ava echoed, an icy dread cascading down her spine.

"Elias declared her mentally unfit," Barnaby said softly, his jaw tightening. "He cited her wild imaginative writings, this very journal, as undeniable proof of her instability. He had his own daughter locked away behind iron bars simply for having the audacity to fall in love with the wrong boy."

The small room suddenly felt claustrophobic. The gentle hum of the fluorescent overhead lights sounded harsh and deafening. Ava felt physically ill.

They had ventured out searching for a romantic local ghost story, only to unearth an ugly, long-buried human cruelty.

"It isn't a ghost story at all," Ava whispered into the heavy silence. "It's a horror story."

"No," Barnaby corrected softly, gazing out the window at the swaying trees. "It is a tragedy. But Sienna… she possessed far more resilience than anyone gave her credit for. She escaped that dreadful place six months later. She was only seventeen years old. She fled into the night and completely erased her tracks. She never returned to Hemlock, and her family chose to believe she had perished rather than admit they had lost control of her. I spent decades searching every registry in the country, but I never found a trace of her."

Maya, her face drained of colour, was carefully turning the frail pages of the journal once more, her finger tracing the bottom margins of the final entry.

"Hold on a second," Maya murmured, her eyes widening in realization. "There's a hidden pattern here. Look at the spacing. Sienna built a code into her final message."

"Are you certain?" Ava asked, her head snapping instantly toward her friend. "What does it say?"

"It's a simple skip cipher," Maya explained, her voice trembling with excitement as she decoded the letters. "It's the first letter of every third word across the last two pages. It reads: '*I will give him the map to my freedom. He will find me where the water meets the sky.*'"

Barnaby's breath hitched, and the remaining colour drained from his face. The journal trembled slightly in his grip.

"The map," he whispered, his eyes shining with sudden, overwhelming tears. "She wasn't writing a ghost story. She was leaving a trail for me to follow. My God… the map was to her. It was always meant for me."

The treasure map of emotional baggage

The revelation of the coded message turned their entire investigation on its head. They were no longer peering into the shadows of a thirty-year-old ghost story; they were following the lingering footprints of a living, breathing woman. A woman who might still be out there, somewhere beyond the haze of secrets and half-remembered rumours.

"I simply don't understand," Ava said, pacing the narrow confines of Barnaby's study. Her footsteps were restless, clicking against the polished floorboards. "If she escaped that night and never returned, how on earth is there a map? A map to what, precisely?"

"It was a code," Barnaby said, his voice trembling with a lifetime of quiet longing. He stared blankly at his own trembling hands resting on his knees. "She used to tell me elaborate stories when we were young. We would invent little ciphers together,

simple childish things. She was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. I was a complete fool not to see it straight away. 'Where the water meets the sky' that isn't some distant, mythical location. It's a riddle, Ava. It's the lake. The far edge of the estate's lake is where the water meets the sky on the horizon."

"But we were literally just standing by the lake," Maya pointed out, leaning against the edge of a heavy oak desk, her brow furrowed in frustration. "There's nothing there. Just tall reeds, cold water, and that looming, creepy house."

"She didn't leave the map *in* the lake," Barnaby insisted, his faded blue eyes suddenly shining with a frantic, uncharacteristic energy. "She left it *by* the lake. The journal entry explicitly says, 'I will give him the map'… she was intending to leave me proper directions. The only question that matters now is where she would choose to conceal it. It had to be a place that belonged strictly to us."

It did not take them long to piece the remaining clues together. The bittersweet story of their youth was scattered across the yellowed pages of the journal. There was one location mentioned far more than any other: their secret meeting place tucked away near the eastern shore. It was the spot where they had

painstakingly carved their initials into the trunk of an ancient oak tree, an ‘S’ and a ‘B’ enclosed within a jagged, crooked heart.

Phoebe, Barnaby’s granddaughter, offered to drive them straight back to the old estate. She asked no tedious questions; she simply recognized the fierce, desperate determination etched into the young women’s faces, combined with the pale intensity in her grandfather’s shaky voice over the telephone. She instinctively understood that a long-buried chapter of local history was about to be unsealed.

They parked near the boundary fence and approached the ancient oak. The tree stood like a silent, towering sentinel by the water’s edge, its deeply scarred bark weathered by decades of harsh winters, yet its towering canopy remained a vibrant, rustling green. Ava knelt down near the base. There, nestled securely deep within the shadowed hollow of its massive trunk, wrapped tightly in a thick piece of oilcloth that had survived thirty long years, was a small, rusted tin box.

Maya reached inside the hollow and pulled the container out with a visibly shaking hand. The lid was stiff with rust and age, but with a sharp metallic

protest, it finally sprang open. Inside, resting gently on a faded bed of crumbling red velvet, lay a single piece of thick paper, folded neatly into a tight square.

Ava carefully unfolded it, holding her breath as she spread the document flat against her knee. It was a meticulously hand-drawn map. At the very top, written in a flourish of elegant, familiar cursive, were four simple words: *The way home.*

"It isn't a map to help someone find her," Ava breathed, her voice barely louder than the breeze through the leaves as she studied the faded ink. "It's a map created for herself. This was how she planned to navigate her way back to safety. This was the exact path she intended to take."

The map detailed the surrounding terrain around the lake, but the traced line did not stop at the shore. It meandered carefully past an old stone bridge, swept behind a small ruined chapel, cut through a dense, overgrown wood, and finally terminated at a tiny, solitary structure situated on the far edge of the property boundary. It was not the grand manor house. It was an old caretaker's cottage, long forgotten by the local estate managers.

Barnaby was on the phone to Phoebe again within moments, his frantic instructions breathless and rushed.

"He says he honestly had no idea the cottage was still standing," Phoebe relayed, hanging up her phone and turning to the others. "It was abandoned decades ago. He said if Sienna was truly looking for a place to hide in plain sight, that is precisely where she would have gone. He's driving over here immediately."

The caretaker's cottage proved to be a place of haunting, tragic beauty. Thick blankets of dark ivy clung tightly to the crumbling stone walls, and the small windowpanes were clouded with decades of grime. To their surprise, the timber front door was entirely unlocked, a quiet testament to a bygone era when people felt no need to lock away their private griefs and secrets.

The interior was a pristine time capsule frozen in time. It contained only a simple iron frame bed, a small wooden table bearing a ceramic vase of long-dead, papery flowers, and a neat stack of handwritten letters. Every single envelope was carefully addressed to *Barnaby Crane*, and every single one remained unsent.

Ava picked up the topmost letter, her fingertips trembling against the yellowed parchment. It was dated precisely three months after Sienna's mysterious disappearance.

"My Dearest Barney," Ava read aloud, her voice soft and trembling in the quiet room. "I am safe. I am hidden somewhere they will never think to look for me. I know you must be worried out of your mind, but I beg of you, please do not come searching for me. I am no longer the innocent girl you once knew. I have seen and done truly terrible things merely to survive the aftermath of that night. The story of my life is certainly no fairytale, but I promise you, I will turn it into one. I shall be the princess who manages to escape the dark tower. I merely require a little more time to build my castle."

There were dozens of similar letters carefully preserved in the pile. They were filled with raw affection, lingering terror, and a desperate, agonizing hope for a peaceful future that had seemed eternally out of reach. However, the final letter, dated a full year later, carried a markedly different tone. It was considerably shorter, marked by a quiet, heartbreaking resignation.

"I know you have moved on with your life, Barney," Ava read quietly. "I have read about your grand success in the newspapers. I am so impossibly proud of the man you have become. My time hiding in these shadows is finally done. I am returning to the very beginning, to the quiet place where our story first started. I will be waiting for you there."

Barnaby arrived at the cottage a short while later, leaning heavily upon his silver-topped wooden cane. His face was a pale mask of utter shock and sorrow. He sank heavily onto the edge of the dusty bed, his hands trembling violently as he stared down at the pile of unread declarations of love.

"She was here the entire time," he whispered, his voice cracking with emotion. "She actually returned. All those lonely years I spent searching the world for her, and she was right here, just beyond my reach."

"She wrote that she was returning to the beginning," Maya said gently, stepping closer to the old man. "Where your story first started. That means the shore of the lake, doesn't it? It always comes back to the lake."

They walked back together toward the water's edge just as the sun began its slow descent below

the horizon, casting long, brilliant golden shadows across the mirror-like surface of the water. Barnaby stood tall at the very edge of the shore, his frail silhouette framed dramatically against the fiery sky. He stared intently across the wide expanse toward the far horizon, searching for a ghost he had carried in his heart for half a century.

And then, unexpectedly, he saw it.

A sudden, clear flash of brilliant white moved deliberately through the trees on the opposite shore. It was no spectral illusion, nor was it a trick of the evening light. It was a living woman, wearing a crisp, elegant white dress that stood out starkly against the deep green foliage, her long silver hair gleaming in the fading light. She was walking slowly along the water's edge with a steady, purposeful pace, her head held remarkably high.

As she rounded the bend of the shore, she caught sight of the figures gathered near the ancient oak, and she abruptly stopped.

For a long, suspended moment, nobody dared to breathe or move. The entire world seemed to hold its breath. Then, the woman, the woman who could only be Sienna Poppins, began to walk deliberately

toward them. She was far older now, her skin lined with the deep, indelible marks of a long life defined by hardship and secret burdens, but her dark eyes remained unmistakably vibrant. They still possessed the very same spark of fierce defiance and boundless love that Ava and Maya had spent days reading about in her private journal.

Barnaby did not utter a single word. He simply let his heavy wooden cane fall to the soft grass, stepped forward, and slowly opened his arms.

Sienna did not hesitate. She closed the remaining distance and walked straight into his embrace. They held each other tightly, buried in a silent, desperate hug beneath the brilliant, watchful glare of the setting sun, two long-lost souls finally reunited after thirty years of silence, sorrow, and enduring hope.

Ava and Maya quietly stepped back, watching the extraordinary scene unfold in silent awe. They had originally set out on a cold afternoon in search of a tragic mystery, but standing by the quiet lake, they knew they had witnessed a genuine miracle. They had uncovered a love so impossibly resilient that neither time, nor tragedy, nor thirty years of dark silence could ever truly destroy it.

It was the best of grimes; it was the worst of grimes

It was, objectively, the most romantic thing any of them had ever witnessed and that included every grand, sweeping cinematic masterpiece Maya had ever forced Ava to sit through on a rainy Saturday afternoon. The reunion of Barnaby Crane and Sienna Poppins was not marked by frantic declarations or thunderous applause; it was a quiet, tearful affair, far more potent than any rehearsed theatrical melodrama.

They sat together on the edge of the weathered wooden dock, their legs dangling over the still, dark water of the lake. Their hands were tightly entwined, their silvered heads bowed close together as they whispered secrets that were thirty years overdue.

"This is completely insane," Maya whispered to Ava, her voice barely a breath as they deliberately stepped back to give the long-separated couple a measure of privacy. "We found a real-life, actual, breathing person. Not a phantom, not an echo. We found her. We actually solved the mystery."

"We found the end of the story," Ava corrected softly, though a brilliant, helpless grin was tugging at the corners of her mouth. "It isn't quite the same thing. We didn't unearth a ghost; we found a lady with exceptionally fine taste in secret hideouts."

The two girls stood by the treeline, deeply torn between the polite urge to give the couple their space and a burning, desperate curiosity to know every single detail. Fortunately, Sienna Poppins possessed a personality as delightfully direct as her written prose. She patted Barnaby's weathered hand, stood up, and briskly brushed down her vintage white dress, which, Ava keenly noted, was suspiciously pristine and free of grime for someone living in a secluded lake cottage. She turned and strode purposefully towards them.

"So," Sienna said, her voice carrying a faint scratchiness from long disuse, yet remaining remarkably sharp. "You are the clever young ladies

who found the journal. You're the ones who brought my Barney back to me after all these lingering years. I imagine you must have a million questions burning in those bright heads."

"Yeah! Like, how on earth did you fake your own death?" Maya blurted out instantly, abandoning all subtlety. "And why was the map hidden in an old hollow oak? And what is the actual deal with the ghost that half the town swears they've seen at dusk?"

Sienna let out a laugh. It was a rusty, rhythmic sound, reminiscent of an ancient grandfather clock striking twelve in an empty hallway. "One at a time, my dear. First, the easiest matter. I didn't fake my death—not truly. I simply let my family believe what was most convenient for them. I left a cryptic note to make them assume I had run off to the chaos of the city. Then, I retreated to the one place they would never think to search: right under their pretentious noses."

"But your family, the Poppins line, they were practically royalty around here," Ava said, stepping forward, her eyes wide. "They had money, influence, and the whole local police force in their pockets. How did you manage to stay hidden for decades?"

Sienna's smile turned razor-thin. "Money and influence are merely loud noise, child. True invisibility comes from becoming a total ghost to their selective memory. They wrote me off because it suited them. I was the problem, the scandal, the dark embarrassment to the family name. They were only too happy to believe I was gone forever. And I was more than happy to let them. But I still had to be careful. That's why I used the cipher in my writings. That's why I hid the map. I was terrified that if anyone found the journal, they would track me down. So I embedded a secret map to my refuge within the pages. I always harboured a foolish hope that if Barney ever found the journal, he would trace the path and find me."

"But he never had the journal," Maya said, her brow furrowing. "We did."

"True," Sienna agreed softly, her dark eyes glittering with warmth. "And you, my brave dears, were the ones destined to discover it. It feels as though the universe was simply waiting for the right pair of curious minds to come along. Now, you said you had more questions. Ask away."

Maya, who had been practically vibrating with pent-up energy, finally let her biggest query fly. "The

ghost! The infamous Ghost of Hemlock Lake in the white dress! People have reported sightings for thirty years. Is it… is it really you?"

A remarkably sly, conspiratorial smile crossed Sienna's face. "Well," she drawled, prolonging the word for dramatic effect. "That might be a bit of a harmless fib. In my youth, when the solitude grew too heavy, I was known to take late walks along the water's edge at dusk in this very white dress. I suppose part of me hoped someone might catch a glimpse of me. Someone might tell a story. It was my secret way of staying alive in the town's collective memory. If I was doomed to be a ghost, I was still a Poppins. I was still a part of Hemlock."

"So you intentionally started the haunting legend?" Ava asked, thoroughly incredulous.

"I might have… gently encouraged it," Sienna admitted, winking. "I knew it was silly, perhaps even a little cruel to the faint-hearted. But it afforded me a vital sense of control, a small way to push back against the rigid family that had discarded me. And I'll confess, the mystery of it was splendid fun. It made me feel like the cunning heroine in one of my gothic stories, rather than just the tragic girl hidden in the attic. It was my own quiet rebellion."

"Your family told everyone you were insane," Maya said quietly, the weight of the town's old gossip settling over her.

"They desperately wanted to believe I was," Sienna replied, her sharp voice softening into something sombre. "It was infinitely easier for them to believe I was mad than to accept that I was simply a girl who loved a boy they deemed beneath their social standing. Cruelty is so often born from pure fear, and they were utterly terrified of losing their precious, brittle reputation. They didn't want a daughter who thought for herself, who dared to choose her own path. So they tried to lock me away from the world. But you see," she gestured grandly to the dense forest and the shimmering water around her, "I was never truly trapped. I escaped. I created my own freedom, and I never once looked back."

Barnaby, who had quietly approached and was watching her with an expression of profound, unabashed adoration, finally spoke. "She's still the exact same girl I fell in love with," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "The same unbroken spirit, the same glorious defiance. The world tried its absolute hardest to break her, but it never stood a chance."

"Not for lack of trying, my love," Sienna said softly, reaching out to squeeze his hand before turning back to the girls. "Now, enough about old ghosts. Tell me about yourselves. You've been my brilliant knights in shining armour today, and I think I deserve to know the young ladies behind the rescue."

And so, under the watchful, golden gaze of the setting sun, the four of them sat together by the tranquil lake, exchanging stories late into the evening. Ava and Maya spoke eagerly of their upcoming transition to high school, their grand ambitions, and their quietest fears. Sienna listened with an intense, unwavering focus, nodding along to every word. When they had finally finished, she reached out and gently took both of their hands in her own.

"Don't ever let anyone tell you who you have to be," she said, her voice fiercely authoritative. "Not your families, not your teachers, and certainly not your peers. The only person who gets to write the chapters of your story is you. That is the greatest lesson my isolation taught me, and that is the truth I want you to carry with you forever."

Reckoning and realization

The news of Sienna Poppins' sudden "resurrection" spread through the sleepy village of Hemlock like wildfire through dry pine. The local newspaper, the *Hemlock Gazette*, which had been precisely one hard-hitting editorial about a prize-winning pumpkin away from complete irrelevancy, promptly placed her on the front page under a banner headline. People who had grown up listening to the spine-chilling legend of the Beaumont ghost flocked to the shimmering edges of the lake, hoping for a fleeting glimpse of the mysterious woman. Sienna, ever the seasoned showwoman, played to her audience with effortless flair. She stood at the end of the rickety wooden dock, waving serenely to the gathered onlookers with a radiant smile that managed to be both remarkably gracious and subtly wicked.

Not everyone, however, was quite so thrilled by her sudden return from the dead.

By mid-afternoon, a solicitor arrived at the golden, sunlit porch of the Golden Oak Retirement Home. He was representing the vast, untouched estate of Elias Poppins, who had passed away a decade prior. The man was extraordinarily thin, possessed a pinched, sharp face, and carried a worn leather briefcase that looked as though it contained the dark, pedantic secrets of the universe.

"You shall have to properly prove your identity, madam," he droned, refusing to look up from a mountain of crisp parchment documents. "A formal DNA test, perhaps. And then, of course, there is the contentious matter of the physical property. The Beaumont estate, which was previously believed to be entirely abandoned, is actually the rightful property of the broader Poppins family trust. You cannot simply waltz back into civilization and claim squatter's rights after thirty long years in absentia."

Sienna, who had been sitting calmly in a plush velvet armchair, leaned back and regarded him with an expression of profound, unadulterated boredom.

"My name is Sienna Poppins," she stated, her voice smooth and entirely unbothered. "The DNA test is a mere formality to satisfy your bureaucratic neuroses. As for the estate itself, you are more than welcome

to keep it. That hollow house is nothing more than a mausoleum of misery. I have no desire to set foot inside it ever again, let alone live there."

The solicitor sputtered, his pale cheeks flushing a mottled red. "But my dear woman, the land alone is worth millions of pounds!"

"Then you may happily donate every last penny to a reputable charity that teaches young girls how to read," Sienna said smoothly, her voice suddenly dripping with a saccharine sweetness that could curdle milk. "That would be a remarkably fitting tribute to the memory of Elias Poppins, don't you think? He was a man who valued nothing in this world except property, cold cash, and an immaculate public reputation. I think he would be absolutely horrified to see his vast wealth squandered on something so… undeniably meaningful."

Standing near the hallway arch, Ava watched in absolute awe. She had never seen anyone dismantle a legal professional with such casual, elegant lethargy. Beside her, Maya was practically fanning her own face with a local pamphlet, mouthing the word "*iconic*" under her breath.

Yet, the sharp confrontation with the solicitor was

merely a side show. The true reckoning occurred much later that evening, when Ava and Maya sat alongside Sienna inside the cosy confines of the caretaker's cottage. Outside, the night air was crisp, while inside, the atmosphere felt thick with the rich scent of aged timber, brewing tea, and the heavy emotional weight of Sienna's past.

Ava cradled her warm mug, looking intently across the table at the older woman. "You wrote in those old letters to Barnaby that you were waiting for the right people," Ava said softly. "Why did you need us, Sienna? Why couldn't you just walk up to his door yourself after all these years? Why orchestrate this whole elaborate trial?"

Sienna's playful demeanour softened, her expressive face growing intensely serious in the amber glow of the oil lamp.

"Because I had to be absolutely sure," Sienna explained quietly, leaning forward. "I had to know that the person who eventually unearthed that buried journal was someone who possessed a compassionate heart, someone who would truly understand the nuances of the story. I needed someone who would see our past for what it genuinely was: a tragedy that desperately deserved a second chance at a happy

ending. If I had simply turned up on Barnaby's doorstep out of the blue after decades of silence, the sheer shock might have been a complete disaster for his fragile heart. But you two… you discovered me through the soul of the story. You undertook the journey. You were the brave ones who painstakingly connected the scattered dots, who found the old map, and who brought us back into each other's orbits. You gave us the invaluable gift of time, time to prepare, and time to process."

Maya smiled warmly, resting her elbows on the wooden table. "Honestly, it was the absolute least we could do. It was such a brilliant mystery to solve. It felt like one part local history, one part hard-boiled detective story, and a massive dose of haunted ghost vibes."

Sienna threw her head back and laughed, a full, rich, velvety sound that filled every corner of the small cottage.

"Ghost vibes," Sienna echoed with deep amusement. "I do like that phrasing. You two are quite simply the best thing that has happened to me in a very long time. But you know, my dears, our story isn't quite over just yet. You originally came to this forgotten

town looking for a hidden answer. Tell me, have you found what you were truly searching for?"

Ava and Maya exchanged a long, quiet look across the table. They had arrived in Hemlock seeking a quaint, ghostly myth to satisfy their curiosity, but they had stumbled into something vastly profound. They had uncovered a sweeping saga of enduring love, fierce resilience, and extraordinary defiance in the face of human cruelty. They had sought a haunting, only to find a living, breathing woman whose legend had eclipsed her truth.

"I think we have," Ava said slowly, a thoughtful smile dawning on her face. "We came here wanting to uncover an old secret, but instead, we found a life. A real, lived, vibrant, messy life. And that is infinitely more powerful than any phantom ghost story."

"Exactly so," Sienna replied softly, reaching across the table to gently pat both of their hands. "Because the very best mysteries, my dear girls, are always the ones that ultimately lead you back to yourself."

The future in the rearview

The final days of summer evaporated like morning mist over the water, a nostalgic blur of tearful goodbyes and tentative new beginnings. Sienna and Barnaby, miraculously reunited after a lifetime spent drifting apart, were settling into the cosy rhythms of the caretaker's cottage. Their afternoons were filled with unhurried strolls along the shoreline and the simple, profound joy of quiet companionship. Unsurprisingly, Sienna had decided to write her memoirs, a monumental endeavour that Ava and Maya were thoroughly invested in overseeing.

"Just promise me you won't make me sound *too* cool," Ava warned, carefully sorting through a stack of yellowed newspaper clippings on the dining table. "I've spent years cultivating a reputation for being the sensible, grounded one. I can't have readers thinking I'm some sort of daring teenage detective."

Sienna chuckled, the tip of her fountain pen scratching smoothly across the crisp paper. "Have no fear, my dear. I intend to paint a scrupulously accurate portrait of you as a highly competent, delightfully sarcastic, and ultimately tender-hearted young woman. And as for you, Maya, I shall dedicate an entire chapter to your boundless gusto."

Maya beamed, leaning back in her chair with an air of modest triumph. "Make sure you include the dramatic moment I cracked the cipher. That was undeniably my finest hour."

"It was practically your *only* hour," Ava teased, nudging her friend's shoulder. "But I'll admit, it was a surprisingly good one."

"Hey! I provided vital moral support the rest of the time," Maya countered with a grin.

Their final day in the quiet town of Hemlock felt distinctly bittersweet. The daunting shadow of the high school they were about to enter loomed large on the horizon, a vast, unpredictable frontier. Yet, the upcoming transition no longer felt insurmountable. Together, they had confronted a thirty-year-old mystery and emerged triumphant on the other side. They had learned that the most haunting ghosts were

rarely spirits in the attic; they were the unsaid words and old regrets carried inside, and the only way to banish them was to face them head-on.

As twilight began to fall, the girls took a final walk down to the lake. The setting sun painted the sky in magnificent streaks of burnt orange, dusty rose, and deep violet. In the fading light, the imposing Beaumont estate looked far less menacing than it had earlier that summer. It no longer seemed like a place of dread, but rather an ancient piece of local history that had finally been laid to rest.

"Can you actually believe it?" Maya asked, kicking a smooth pebble into the shallow water with a soft splash. "By this time next week, we'll be actual high schoolers. We're going to have to navigate crowded corridors, lock combinations, dismal cafeteria food, and an entire hierarchy of social rules."

"It'll be an adventure," Ava replied, a thoughtful smile playing on her lips. "Obviously a very different kind of adventure from unearthing family secrets, but an adventure nonetheless. Besides, if we can solve a decades-old cold case, I'm fairly certain we can handle the minor mysteries of secondary school."

"Like discovering who keeps leaving half-eaten

sandwiches in the library?" Maya offered, her eyes twinkling. "Or deciphering why the physical education teacher insists on wearing nylon shorts in the dead of winter?"

Ava laughed softly, the sound floating across the calm water. "Precisely. Those are the truly profound questions of human existence."

They stood in comfortable, easy silence for a long moment, listening to the water lap gently against the pebbled shore. The cool evening breeze carried the earthy scent of pine and damp soil.

Movement near the cottage caught Ava's eye. Sienna and Barnaby were emerging from the warm glow of the porch light, walking hand in hand towards the beach. The decades of separation seemed to melt away when they were together, replaced by a radiant, enduring warmth.

"We couldn't let you leave without a proper send-off," Sienna said, stopping beside them. "And we wanted to give you a small token of our gratitude."

She reached into her cardigan pocket and handed Ava a small package wrapped in brown butcher paper and tied with twine. Ava carefully untied the

knot and folded back the paper to reveal a exquisite, leather-bound journal. It was remarkably similar to the historic volume they had discovered hidden in the Beaumont attic, save for one detail: its cream-coloured pages were entirely blank.

"It's for your own stories," Sienna explained softly, her eyes shining with affection. "You've given up so much of your summer to help me bring the narrative of my past to a close. Now it's time for the two of you to start writing the beginning of yours."

Ava felt a sudden, heavy lump form in her throat as she ran her fingers over the smooth leather cover. "Sienna... thank you," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "This is absolutely perfect."

"Don't go forgetting about us old folks," Barnaby added, his deep voice gruff with suppressed emotion as he adjusted his flat cap. "And don't forget this lake. It'll be sitting right here waiting for you, whenever you need a break from the real world."

Without another word, they pulled together into a tight, four-way embrace. It was a comforting hug that smelled reassuringly of lemon tea, old paperbacks, lavender, and the crisp night air.

When they finally pulled apart, Ava and Maya offered a final, lingering wave before turning back toward the car. They drove home in a serene, reflective silence, the heavy leather journal resting safely on Ava's lap. Outside the window, the night was crystal clear, and a canopy of brilliant stars was beginning to pierce through the darkening sky.

"So," Maya said quietly, leaning her head against the headrest and breaking the silence. "Have you given any thought to what the very first entry in the new journal is going to be about?"

Ava looked down at the blank cover, then out at the dark road stretching ahead. The summer had unfolded into something far grander than she could have ever anticipated. She had set out expecting a boring holiday, only to find a forgotten ghost, a complex mystery, and a story that would remain etched in her heart forever. But more than that, she had discovered a fundamental truth: the most extraordinary stories aren't the ones you read in dusty attics, but the ones you have the courage to live yourself.

"I think," Ava said, a warm, bright smile spreading across her face as she clutched the journal close, "it's going to be a story about a remarkable woman

named Sienna Poppins. And how she taught us that the absolute best way to deal with ghosts is simply to look them in the eye and talk to them."

The End

The mystery of Sienna Poppins

Brenda Wilson

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BRENDA WILSON

THE MYSTERY OF SIENNA POPPINS

Brenda Wilson is a grandmother of five with a literary arsenal that would put a seasoned novelist to shame. Her bedtime stories, a captivating blend of fantastical creatures and mischievous squirrels, have sent her grandkids often into the deep dreamland.